

Home Visits, Ivory Notices, and the Ideological Challenges Posed by “Unwed Mothers”: How the Chicago Housing Authority Approached Tenant Management
from 1949-1969

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Abstract

This thesis will take the reader through three distinct phases of the Chicago Housing Authority’s (CHA) engagement with low-income families seeking federally-assisted housing from 1949 to 1969: the selection process, tenant management, and tenant removal. This structure will allow the reader to understand how the CHA’s classification of “social problem families” posed a significant (and understudied) hardship toward single mothers which permeated every stage of CHA-tenant relations. In the selection phase, the CHA developed ways to classify tenants and predict their likelihood of “benefiting” from public housing. As the pool of tenants continued to widen throughout the 1950s, the CHA developed higher standards of entry for single mothers who failed to adhere to their vision of white, middle-class domesticity. To manage its projects, CHA staff infused their responsibilities as a landlord with a social work agenda. Though their intention was to prepare tenants for a middle-class lifestyle, the effect was a heightened environment of surveillance for single mothers. The practice of home visits deliberately applied domesticity benchmarks to single-parent households. And when management proved to be impossible for certain households, the historically understudied “Ivory Notice” system allowed CHA staff to efficiently remove tenants from public housing.¹

¹ I’d like to thank my roommates and family for their enduring support throughout this thesis process. With your encouragement, I investigated a topic I care deeply about and have completed something that I’m truly proud of. I’m also endlessly grateful for my thesis seminar cohort — it’s been a great experience to share our passions and questions with each other for more than a year now. I’m glad that we made it out of this in one piece. And finally, this thesis would still just be fragments and loosely formed ideas if it wasn’t for the direction, feedback, and intelligence of my preceptor, Zoya, and my advisor, Professor Green.

Introduction

In 1952, J. S. Fuerst — Director of Research and Statistics at the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) — delivered a speech at the National Public Housing Conference in Buffalo, New York. Fuerst begins with, “I have been asked to talk today on the subject of ‘Social Problem Families’. If ever there were a pleasanter phrase for describing a grimmer situation.” Fuerst goes on to provide anecdotal examples of such families housed in Chicago’s public housing, including a single mother with eight delinquent children, a large family with an absentee father, and the “deplorable” housekeeping of a married mother with a boyfriend living in the unit. Fuerst articulated the danger that these tenants posed financially and socially to the CHA, the public housing community, and within their own households. While Fuerst admitted that these social problem families comprised just a fraction of public housing households in Chicago (“150 or 200 out of some 10,000”), “their effect is far greater than their number.” Fuerst was chiefly concerned with one question: what relationship should a housing authority have with social problem families?²

The term used by Fuerst in his speech — “social problem family”³ — was just one of the labels used by public housing authorities across the country in the mid-twentieth century. Also known as “undesirables”, “problem families”, or “broken families”, these households were simultaneously viewed as problems to be solved through social work intervention and threats to the public housing community. Throughout the inaugural decades of the CHA’s administration, CHA employees internally debated how to balance their commitment to providing affordable,

² J.S. Fuerst, “Social Problem Families; Speech Given in Buffalo,” October 17, 1952, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

³ There are several terms and phrases that I will continue to put in quotes. I have chosen to do so deliberately to distance myself as a scholar from the insinuations of these labels. Perhaps at the time they were initially used, their connotation was not as demeaning toward vulnerable populations as they are today (though I doubt this was the case).

decent housing to the most vulnerable families while also selecting the most cost-effective tenants. Some instances of tenant “social problems” posed a quick and easy fix for the CHA: a household with a nuisance pet was told they must get rid of it or lose their public housing unit.⁴ But other “social problems” were much more pervasive, begging the question: to what end could the CHA plausibly intervene in the lives of tenants, when housing alone was not enough to solve the problems of the poor?

Of the most pervasive “social problems” that caught the attention of CHA staff was the issue of single motherhood. Fuerst boasts that, “our authority has been well-known, we like to think, for its non-discriminatory policies. The only criteria that have been used in our acceptance of families from the beginning have been income, degree of need, and, in recent years, residence on redevelopment sites.⁵ Other than this, we have asked no questions.”⁶ This promise of objectivity is heartening, but it is at best an oversimplification of the selection and management strategies of CHA staff in this period. Ignoring the fact that almost all projects in this period were segregated, Fuerst’s speech alone is dominated by anecdotal examples of female tenants who failed to adhere to standards of maternity, such as by keeping a messy house, having unruly children, and/or engaging in sexually promiscuous activities. Fuerst’s attention toward single mothers is reflective of a culture of surveillance which influenced every level of tenant management, from selection to discretionary evictions. Though the CHA developed policies to address the broader issue of “undesirable families” in both the pool of public housing applicants and tenants, archival evidence demonstrates that many of these policies were targeted at single-

⁴ Mary Wirth, “The CHA Dilemma”, circa 1957, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

⁵ More on “redevelopment sites” and areas forfeited to urban renewal later.

⁶ Fuerst, “Social Problem Families; Speech Given in Buffalo.”

parent households. The CHA's scrutiny toward single mothers is rife for contemporary analysis, as Fuerst's claim toward the CHA's "non-discriminatory policies" only went so far in practice.

Background

To understand how these complex power dynamics between tenants and housing authority staff developed, it is important to highlight the purpose and origins of public housing. Public housing was initially formed by the Housing Act of 1937, which was a part of the New Deal agenda to provide basic amenities to families struggling during the Great Depression.⁷ The Housing Act of 1937 provided funding to municipalities to rehabilitate or develop housing for the urban poor. This Act led to the establishment of the Chicago Housing Authority and the creation of the first row houses in Chicago. The creation of public housing was a monumental moment in the history of social policy and was viewed as a success, even if its scale was still small.

More than a decade later, the Housing Act of 1949 monumentally increased the scale of public housing, promising to improve living standards for "all American famil[ies]" by producing new housing and clearing "slums and blighted areas."⁸ In many American cities, decades of population growth from industrialization led to densely populated areas of poverty. These areas were defined by dilapidated tenement structures and unsanitary living conditions.⁹ To account for the housing displacement that would accompany an urban development agenda, the Act supplied public housing authorities with the financial resources to develop 810,000

⁷ Elizabeth Wood, *The Beautiful Beginnings The Failure to Learn: Fifty Years of Public Housing in America* (National Center for Housing Management, 1982).

⁸ Robert A. Taft, "Housing Act of 1949," Pub. L. No. [Public Law 81-171, Chapter 338, 81st Cong.; 63 Stat. 432; 42 U.S.C. 1471 et seq.], 413 (1949).

⁹ Edith Abbott, "The Growth of the Population and Tenements in a Prairie City, 1833-93," in *The Tenements of Chicago, 1908-1935* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1936), 1-33; Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Reissue edition (New York: Vintage, 1992); Wood, *The Beautiful Beginnings The Failure to Learn*.

additional public housing units. In the coming years, the aims of public housing would shift from housing just the working poor to housing families displaced from the slums. To accomplish this, the Act also forced public housing authorities to adopt strict policies of eviction toward over-income families.¹⁰ For many housing experts at the time, this policy was the beginning of “The Great Purge” of working-class tenants.¹¹ In Chicago, the Housing Act of 1949 led to the clearance of low-income areas of the city — areas dominated by white and nonwhite households alike — and the CHA’s construction of some of its most infamous high-rise projects.¹²

While the CHA has always been beholden to federal authority, the first two decades of its existence prove that much of their power was locally derived. The CHA in this period was shaped immeasurably by its leadership and relationship to local politicians. Under the leadership of Elizabeth Wood¹³ from 1937 to 1954, the Chicago Housing Authority engaged in a mission to provide middle-class standards of living for its predominantly working-class tenants, with the expectation that these tenants would behave (or learn to behave) in a manner befitting their accommodations. Wood was also a champion of housing the black community, creating large-scale projects to house African-American veterans and wartime workers¹⁴ while also crusading

¹⁰ Though the income ceiling was lowered gradually so as to avoid mass evictions.

¹¹ Wood, *The Beautiful Beginnings The Failure to Learn*, 27–28.

¹² D. Bradford Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010); J. S. Fuerst, ed., “Introduction,” in *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 1–8; Audrey Petty, ed., *High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing* (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney’s, 2013).

¹³ For more information on Wood’s history and her period of leadership in the CHA and the New York City Housing Authority, see Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*; Fuerst, “Introduction,” in *When Public Housing Was Paradise*, 3–4; Wood, *The Beautiful Beginnings The Failure to Learn*, vii–viii; Bruce Lambert, “Elizabeth Wood, 93, Innovator In Early Days of Public Housing,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 1993; Kenan Heise, “Elizabeth Wood, 93, CHA Crusader,” *The Chicago Tribune*, January 19, 1993.

¹⁴ Based on the unofficial guidelines of Harold Ickes’ Neighborhood Composition Rule, the tenants of a public housing project built in a given community should reflect the demographics of that community. Given that almost all communities in Chicago were segregated in this period, the projects should follow. See Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York, NY: Liveright, 2017); Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*.

for the integration of the projects, a mostly fruitless operation that she stood by despite intense pushback from white tenants, city officials, and the press.¹⁵

Wood's mission and incorruptible attitude attracted highly skilled staff so that the early ranks of the CHA were filled with progressive social workers. Oral histories from early original members indicate that there was an unprecedented and still yet unseen caliber of employee in this period, where CHA employees "always tried to do more for the city and more for its tenants than [they were] legally obligated to do."¹⁶ Wood inspired a culture of social work at the CHA, rather than simply inspiring landlord-tenant relationships. She responded to objections that her methods were paternalistic by framing them as a form of empowerment: strict expectations for tenants in public housing would allow tenants to "mature" with guidance from the CHA.¹⁷

Pointing to the fact that a majority of the population seeking relocation from the slums were African-Americans, Wood reemphasized her position to integrate the projects. This move, in addition to tensions stemming from her unwillingness to accept patronage contracts from private housing developers, eventually led to her downfall. While on extended sick leave in 1954, she was demoted by Mayor Kennelly under the guise of "managerial restructuring." After protesting her relocation and criticizing the board of CHA commissioners, she was summarily fired and replaced by William B. Kean, a former U.S. Army general with a complicated history with race¹⁸ and a decidedly bureaucratic approach to running the CHA. The upset in leadership

¹⁵ Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*.

¹⁶ J.S. Fuerst, ed., "John Ducey (Interview)," in *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 13.

¹⁷ Dorothea Kahn, "Pioneer in Public Housing, Elizabeth Wood Blazes Way for Other Women," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 4, 1941.

¹⁸ As a military leader in the Korean War, Kean's argument for the integration of troops was as practical as it was grounded in racial prejudice, as he considered a segregated black battalion under his command "untrustworthy and incapable of carrying out missions expected of an infantry regiment". See Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*.

led to a gradual diminishment of the CHA's social work agenda as many Wood-era staff either elected or were forced to leave.¹⁹

While the fixed-rent restrictions of the Housing Act of 1949 posed a significant, though not insurmountable, challenge for CHA staff, the passage of the Brooke Amendment (known formally as the Housing Urban Development Act of 1969) was the final nail in the coffin for their social work mission. The intention of the Brooke Amendment was to protect tenants from rent increases by revenue-seeking housing authorities by capping rent for all tenants in public housing at 25% of their income.²⁰ However, an inadvertent result was the exodus of most of the remaining working-class tenants. The consequences of the Brooke Amendment served as the finale that the CHA had dreaded since the passage of the Housing Act of 1949. While the Housing Act of 1937 had been a blank check which empowered the CHA to do what best suited their specialized interests, the period between the Housing Act of 1949 and the Brooke Amendment marked a period where CHA staff still possessed agency, but were forced to make concessions on many fronts as they struggled to manage an ever-changing tenancy.²¹

Other histories of Chicago's public housing in the twentieth century focus on the pre-1970s period as a golden age of public housing, where the projects had strong ties to social services, tenants were neat and upwardly mobile, and the supply of housing was low enough that the CHA could be extremely selective of its potential tenants. Mainly, these histories identify racial discrimination as the defining issue which plagued public housing from the beginning. But my analysis of primary and secondary sources in this period uncovers a culture of discrimination

¹⁹J. S. Fuerst, ed., "Ed Holmgren (Interview)," in *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 15–16; J. S. Fuerst, ed., "Introduction," in *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 1–8.

²⁰ Edward Brooke, "Housing and Urban Development Act of 1969," [Public Law 91-152, 91st Cong.] (1969).

²¹ Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*.

by the CHA which has gone mostly undetected. Though integration and the racial management of the projects was certainly important to the CHA, the “problem of the unwed mother,”²² irrespective of the mother’s race, was an issue that plagued CHA staff throughout the 1950s and 1960s. As the number of single mothers in public housing grew, the CHA channeled their hostility toward this population by developing reform-or-remove policies which targeted aspects of their lifestyles. This thesis will explore how the CHA’s fluctuating management policies toward the “social problem” family served as a prelude to the broader stigmatization of single mothers in public housing long after 1969.

Historiography

Many scholars have studied the institution of public housing — including its mission and its failings. Chicago’s public housing has been similarly studied as a specific site of interest, due to its tumultuous history and ongoing administration. D. Bradford Hunt’s²³ 2010 book, *Blueprint for Disaster*,²⁴ is the most complete and robust history of Chicago’s public housing. *Blueprint for Disaster* is one of the few works at my disposal which considers Chicago’s public housing in the 1950s-1960s in any serious capacity. In this period, Hunt is mostly interested in the influence of Elizabeth Wood’s leadership and her untimely removal. Hunt’s discussion of tenant selection and management practices is brief — he focuses on the broad trends of increased tenant applicants from the slums and relaxed standards for tenant selection. Moreover, *Blueprint for*

²² L.G. McDougal to Elizabeth Wood (Executive Secretary), “Undesirable Families,” May 22, 1952, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 13].

²³ Dr. Hunt, currently the Vice President for Research and Academic Programs at the Newberry Library in Chicago, was a great help for this thesis. He provided suggestions, sources, and insights that were invaluable to thesis.

²⁴ Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*.

Disaster fails to interrogate the 1950s-1960s as a period of negotiated values where issues such as gender and motherhood became a fixation of CHA staff.

The connection between gender and public housing has been studied through a number of disciplinary lenses. Other explorations of public housing focus on the creation of long-term community networks in public housing. Works such as Roberta M. Feldman and Susan Stall's *The Dignity of Resistance*²⁵ examines how public housing served as a rich source of community for black women in the late twentieth century. Feldman and Stall used a sociological approach to understand networks of motherhood in Wentworth Gardens, a public housing project in Chicago. Their work combines oral histories with source analysis to challenge assumptions that crime and poverty tainted the sense of community in public housing.

Similarly, Rhonda Y. Williams' *The Politics of Public Housing*²⁶ places the perspectives of black women in public housing at the forefront of her research. Williams provides a fruitful history of community organizing by women in Baltimore's public housing. The stigmatization of welfare is dismantled by Williams in favor of her perception that welfare was a tool for subsistence and a form of reparative justice. Williams' investigation of the activism of women (white and black) in public housing in Baltimore is especially fruitful, as she explores the far-reaching spheres of concern for women. "As part of the New Deal citizenry...black and white women fulfilled their gender obligations to the family and accepted responsibility for the home..." while functioning "as advocates for their children, extended families, and fellow

²⁵ Roberta M. Feldman and Susan Stall, *The Dignity of Resistance: Women Residents' Activism in Chicago Public Housing* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²⁶ Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004).

tenants.”²⁷ Understanding that in most households a woman’s purview extends beyond her own interests informed my approach to my thesis.

Both of these works provide background on the earlier periods in public housing’s history, their main focus is on the post-1980s tenant activism. By the 1980s, the projects were predominantly nonwhite and a majority of households were headed by single women. While 1950s-era CHA staff might have viewed this as a failure to retain a certain caliber of tenant, Feldman and Stall demonstrate that this change empowered many women in ways previously unseen in public housing. Feldman and Stall’s study of Wentworth Gardens, which begins at the tail end of my thesis’s coverage, serves as a reminder of how the changes in tenant demographics led to significant shifts in the power dynamics between the CHA and its tenants. These scholars provide background on public housing that is integral to my thesis. But unlike many of the historians who came before me, I am less concerned with making broad claims as to the when, why, and who was to blame for the decline of Chicago public housing. I aim to show, following Brad Hunt’s corrective suggestion, that Chicago public housing’s association with structural, gendered inequality had as much to do, historically speaking, with internalized prejudices regarding its tenants as it did with external transformations in politics and society.

Primary Sources

This thesis will utilize a combination of primary sources to depict the processes and policies of CHA’s tenant management. First and foremost, this analysis relies on the Mary Bolton Wirth Papers at the University of Chicago Special Collections Research Center. Wirth’s ties to the University were likely established during her husband’s tenure as a professor of

²⁷ Williams, 71.

sociology. The archive includes hundreds of documents in the form of inter-office memorandums between CHA staff, drafts and copies of speeches, drafts and hard copies of journal articles and other publications, meeting notes, studies, and personal notes. While most of the material in the collection is either authored by, edited by (with comments), or addressed to Wirth, many others have no apparent ties to her. It is likely that as a Supervisor at the CHA and consultant for many groups across Chicago (including the Department of Urban Renewal), many documents were brought to Wirth to keep her updated and informed. These documents go a long way to provide the documents from Wirth's employment at the CHA both the day-to-day minutiae of a large housing authority as well as the longstanding philosophical debates between staff as to what the CHA's purpose should be.

The Mary Bolton Wirth Papers have been largely underutilized by historians. To the best of my knowledge, only Hunt in *Blueprint for Disaster* has referred to these documents in any serious capacity. However, Wirth is only used as a provider of primary sources rather than as a significant historical actor in Chicago's public housing history. These documents not only illuminate a fascinating period in the CHA's history, but demonstrate the influence and agency of a working woman in the mid-twentieth century. The Mary Bolton Wirth Papers capture Wirth's legacy and are deserving of historical excavation.

Mary Wirth (also referred to as Mary Bolton Wirth or Mary B. Wirth) was a career social worker, having worked for decades in the field as an assistant probation officer to the Juvenile Court of Cook County,²⁸ an employee at the New Orleans Child Guidance Clinic,²⁹ an Assistant

²⁸ Joseph L. Moss, Chief Probation Officer, to Mary Wirth, Juvenile Court of Cook County, November 29, 1924, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

²⁹ State of Illinois Department of Public Welfare Institute for Juvenile Research to Mrs. Louis Wirth, August 24, 1929, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

Supervisor in the Works Progress Administration,³⁰ and as the Executive Secretary of the Chicago Chapter of the American Association of Social Workers³¹ before being employed by the CHA in 1952. Wirth served as the Supervisor of Community and Tenant Relations, a division of the CHA which handled tenant selection and the management of social services in the projects. After leaving the CHA in 1958 (for unknown reasons), Wirth did not stray far from public housing. She acted as a consultant and board member for several social work agencies around Chicago as well as an expert advisor to groups³² seeking access to public housing for their low-income clients. Her knowledge of social service was developed from decades of interactions with America's poor; armed with this expertise, she navigated tenant management with confidence and demonstrated her ability to interrogate the social character of tenants.

The archival documents do not make it clear whether Wirth was leading the charge against "social problem families" and single mothers or if she was just reflecting values that were popular both at the CHA and in the social service industry writ large. While the latter is more likely, her agency and influence as an authority figure for the CHA should not be understated. As a widow and single mother herself after the death of her husband (sociologist Louis Wirth) in 1952, Wirth's wariness toward single mothers should not be taken as categorical animus. Like many social workers at the CHA, her perception of single mothers was much more complicated. She saw the population of single mothers as symptomatic of larger, structural issues faced by Chicago's poor and recognized that not every single mother's social problem was of her own making. But regardless of her intentions, it is undeniable that policies originating from her

³⁰ Martha E. Phillips, Associate Director, Division of Employment to Mrs. Wirth, WPA, October 7, 1937, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

³¹ Mary Bolton Wirth to George E. Woods, Chairman, Subcommittee on Witnesses November 5, 1947, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

³² Including the Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago and Chicago's Department of Urban Renewal.

pen led to higher standards of selection and management for single mothers, thus ensuring that many were not given the resource of public housing.

Another historically visible figure at the CHA in this period was J. S. Fuerst (whose 1952 speech, “Social Problem Families,” opens this thesis). Fuerst, a producer of rich primary and secondary sources on the topic of public housing, was the Director of Research and Statistics at the CHA from 1946-1953 and later a professor of social welfare policy at Loyola University's School of Social Work for more than two decades.³³ Documents from the CHA provide that as an employee of the CHA, Fuerst conducted studies and represented the CHA at meetings and conferences. Fuerst was an ardent supporter of Elizabeth Wood, evidenced by their alignment of views and his choice to leave the CHA in protest of Wood's removal.³⁴ Even though he left the CHA in 1953, Fuerst continued to be an important voice in documenting Chicago's public housing. Notably, Fuerst's later research identified “social problem families” headed by nonwhite women as one of the main causes for public housing's failure.³⁵

Fuerst's 2003 publication, *When Public Housing Was Paradise*,³⁶ provides a combination of oral histories from staff and tenants in Chicago's early public housing (from 1940-1965). Responding to contemporary narratives³⁷ that negatively painted life in public housing, Fuerst countered by providing a defense of the period in which he remembered the CHA to be high-functioning and tenants were upwardly mobile. By the time he began interviewing subjects in the 1980s/90s, many were accomplished in their careers and almost all had become removed from Chicago's public housing. This maintains the narrative that Fuerst was interested in — that

³³ Trevor Jenson, “J.S. ‘Jimmy’ Fuerst: 1917-2009,” *The Chicago Tribune*, December 8, 2009.

³⁴ Jenson.

³⁵ Fuerst and Petty, “High-Rise Housing for Low-Income Families.”

³⁶ J.S. Fuerst, *When Public Housing Was Paradise*.

³⁷ Such as Alex Kotlowitz's 1991 *There Are No Children Here* and Nicholas Lemann's 1991 *The Promised Land*.

public housing had changed so drastically throughout the twentieth century that the best staff and tenants either elected to leave or were forced out altogether. The oral histories are incredibly valuable, as they are a keen source of direct material on the experiences of historical actors involved in public housing in my period of interest. However, the format of the oral histories in Fuerst's book is not ideal: the interviews were edited by Fuerst and his side of the conversation — his questions, prompts, etc. — are not included. This means that Fuerst's power to guide the conversations or potentially elicit certain responses from interviewees is unknown.³⁸

Oral histories from Audrey Petty's 2013 *High Rise Stories*³⁹ are markedly different from those in *When Public Housing was Paradise* because all of those interviewed are tenants and all still live in public housing. Unlike Fuerst, Petty is driven less by a desire to establish a specific narrative about a period in Chicago's public housing. Instead, her book reads more as an exploration of the different kinds of experiences of tenants across different projects.

Other primary sources consulted for this project include twentieth-century newspaper and journal articles, contemporary publications by social workers, and dissertations from doctoral students at the University of Chicago.

³⁸For example, many of those interviewed point to the growing number of single-parent households as one of the leading causes of public housing's decline. This was also a view expressed by Fuerst in a number of publications, including his 1952 speech. It is impossible to know whether interviewers consciously chose to address single-parent households or if Fuerst prompted these statements with leading questions.

³⁹ Petty, *High Rise Stories*.

I. Tenant Selection: Adaptation and Exclusion in the Face of the “CHA Dilemma”

“Taken as a whole, [the] ability [of public housing authorities] to pick and choose among potential tenants [was] perhaps the most critical part of the operation of a housing project.”⁴⁰

- J.S. Fuerst and Roy Petty, 1977

Beginning with the CHA’s creation in 1937, the demand for public housing always outstripped the CHA’s supply. For this reason, CHA staff were afforded the power of selectivity over their tenants. But while in the wartime years the CHA could afford to select only “sound able families” for the projects, the 1950s saw these families “replaced at an accelerating rate by less competent, socially disorganized, broken, and assistance families.”⁴¹ This led to what Wirth described as the “CHA Dilemma” — the inability for the CHA to satisfy their mission to provide more than just housing to Chicago’s “slum families”⁴² while also operating a “sound business.”⁴³ In the past, the CHA’s operational equilibrium was achieved by mainly selecting families with few or no social problems, such as working-class or veteran families whose main issue was accessing affordable housing. For those families requiring additional intervention, the CHA had developed a strong infrastructure to provide social “rehabilitation” by matching tenants with social services. In the face of this problem, the CHA developed heightened standards of screening tenants in an attempt to create projects which could be handled adequately by

⁴⁰ J.S. Fuerst and Roy Petty, “Public Housing in the Courts: Pyrrhic Victories for the Poor,” *The Urban Lawyer* 9, no. 3 (1977): 499.

⁴¹ Jack L. Wank, “Meeting of the Community and Tenant Relations Division,” June 20, 1957, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 15].

⁴² While the “slum family” vocabulary was commonly used in inter-CHA documents, Wirth cautions Housing Aides to “treat tenants like humans” and avoid “us[ing] the word “slum” when referring to someone else’s home.”

⁴³ Wirth, “The CHA Dilemma.”

management staff. As Fuerst stated it in his 1952 speech: “we should use our supply [of public housing] where it will do the most good.”⁴⁴

This section will address several components of tenant selection, beginning hierarchical classifications of prospective tenants, race and gender in tenant selection, and housekeeping-based evaluations of tenants. Though there are some methodological overlap in the CHA’s strategies for selection and management, by analyzing them separately I will demonstrate how scrutiny toward certain populations of tenants did not end after being approved for public housing; despite strict screening processes, the CHA still considered tenants with “social problems” as causes for intervention.

The number of “social problem” families housed by the CHA and seeking tenancy in public housing steadily grew as urban renewal left thousands of low-income Chicagoans without access to stable housing. Fielding complaints from management on the issues posed by high concentrations of “social problem” families in certain projects, CHA staff resolved that the best course of action was to institute highly selective standards of tenancy at the “point of entry” for tenants. The goal was to screen out tenants whose “social problems” were insurmountable as well as tenants who were unresponsive to social interventions. Wirth rationalized that the CHA could either “play a constructive role in the life of a family or it might...have little significance where serious and prolonged family disorganization already exist[s].”⁴⁵

The systems of exclusion and discrimination imbued in their selection process must be understood and unpacked. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, CHA staff internally debated the

⁴⁴ Fuerst, “Social Problem Families; Speech Given in Buffalo.”

⁴⁵ Mary Wirth, “Point-of-Entry Work with ‘Problem Families’ Proving Helpful,” *Journal of Housing, Troubled and Troublesome Families*, April 1957 (April 1957): 127–30.

development of a standardized approach to selecting tenants. However, staff balked at the idea of a formulaic approach to tenant selection, even as other public housing authorities took this route.⁴⁶ While tenants with criminal records or records of failure to pay rent were almost always automatically excluded, the CHA did not employ the same approach to issues such as family composition, race, or employment history. Even as the CHA began to scrutinize their selection of single mothers and other “undesirable” households, the CHA never resorted to categorical exclusions of these tenants. In his 1952 speech, Fuerst draws on an example of another public housing authority who chose to adopt “a straight ban on admission of all families with illegitimate children.”^{47,48} Fuerst admitted that while this method might reduce some of the problems of a housing authority, its factual justification was nonsensical. How could a housing authority decide which “social problems” to allow while others are excluded? Fuerst jokes, “As new applicants apply, we tell them ‘No prostitutes this week; but if you know an alcoholic send him around. We have an opening.’”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ In all areas of tenant management, there is ample evidence that the CHA looked abroad for solutions. Early social workers (such as Elizabeth Wood and Catherine Bauer Wurster) were influenced by council housing and poverty policy in the United Kingdom. See Elizabeth Wood, “Housing Design: A Social Theory,” *Ekistics* 12, no. 74 (1961): 383–392; Wurster, *A Citizen’s Guide to Public Housing*. Staffers such as Wirth and Fuerst referenced the tenant selection and management strategies of housing authorities in other large cities across the United States. At times, the CHA used the policies of other housing authorities as inspiration or justification for their own policies. See Jack L. Wank to Mary Wirth, “Re: Community Relations Division, New York City Housing Authority”, January 4, 1957, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 2]. But overall, CHA staff maintained that their policies were crafted to address the specific issues faced by low-income Chicagoans

⁴⁷ Fuerst, “Social Problem Families; Speech Given in Buffalo.”

⁴⁸ In this era, the courts protected tenants from categorical denials to public housing. The case *Thomas v. Housing Authority of Little Rock* is cited by many: the Housing Authority of Little Rock created a rule which denied unwed mothers access to public housing. The rule “presupposed promiscuity on the part of all unwed mothers...and the court rightly said that such a rule, prejudging people on moral standards, was patently unfair... housing authorities did not have the right to arbitrarily exclude a whole ‘artificial class’ of people based on an assumption of possible future immorality among some of them.” Despite Fuerst’s support for the court’s decision, he reflected that the legal precedent set by the case from a court intervening in tenant selection was devastating to housing authorities everywhere. See J.S. Fuerst and Roy Petty, “Public Housing in the Courts”: 499.

⁴⁹ Fuerst, “Social Problem Families; Speech Given in Buffalo.”

The scale of the CHA's operation had never been bigger and yet the large staff they enjoyed during the Wood administration was all but gone.⁵⁰ In the Community and Tenant Relations division, Wirth felt the burden of assessing tens of thousands of applications to public housing — applications which did little to paint a complete picture of the needs and issues of each household. To address the deficiency, Wirth tested out the use of a single "tenant eligibility consultant" in 1955 based on the success of social worker "Housing Aides"⁵¹ in the 1940s. The tenant eligibility consultant used their background in social work to establish the "social eligibility" of tenants — weighing their existing "social problems" against their ability to change through social work interventions.⁵² The consultant devoted extra time toward the investigation of "questionable" families, assuming that only some of these families could "make constructive use of public housing occupancy."⁵³

To this end, the consultant would categorize tenants as either "Best," "Better," "Good," or "Bad" based on a number of qualities.⁵⁴ This categorization would determine the level of investigation required by the consultant — including home visits, interviews with neighbors, audits of records with local social service agencies and law enforcement, and school records for households with children.⁵⁵ This shift from multiple Housing Aides to a single tenant eligibility consultant is representative of the strategic concessions made by CHA staff in this era. Likewise, the development of the "Practical Classification of Tenancy" [*see Figure 1 in the Appendix*] was

⁵⁰ Fuerst, ed., "Ed Holmgren (Interview)," in *When Public Housing Was Paradise*; Fuerst, ed., "Introduction," in *When Public Housing Was Paradise*.

⁵¹ Jack L. Wank to Mary Wirth, "Re: Community Relations Division, New York City Housing Authority", January 4, 1957, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 2]

⁵² Mary Wirth, "Attached is a review of the problem situations, of which the Social Work Consultant has kept a separate record during 1961 and 1962—Hyde Park Site Office," August 1962, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 4].

⁵³ Mary Wirth, "Point-of-Entry Work with 'Problem Families' Proving Helpful."

⁵⁴ Mary Wirth, "A Practical Classification of Tenancy", January 3, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 2].

⁵⁵ Mary Wirth, "Point-of-Entry Work with 'Problem Families' Proving Helpful."

another important adaptation that allowed CHA staff to track and categorize tenants as they went through multiple stages of the selection process.

The “Practical Classification of Tenancy” demonstrates the hierarchy of tenancy that the CHA sought to document. The fluidity of the classification is indicative of the discretion involved in the process of adjudicating and selecting tenants. Though the subsequent section on tenant management delves into the interventions used by the CHA to *improve* a family, this “practical classification” was concerned only with the fundamental characteristics of a household. Presumably, it would be nearly impossible for a household to alter their family structure and history of mental illness. Households needed to clear a bar to get into public housing — only after selection would they gain access to (or be subjected to, depending on the situation) social services to improve their station. A “Good” tenant could be a single parent with children born out of wedlock, but they needed to demonstrate “a desire to give their children the opportunities of project living.”⁵⁶ At this stage, the CHA accepted that most of its tenants would be flawed in some way. What became important, then, was the sum of each tenant’s solvable problems. This practical, albeit reductive, model of classification led the tenant eligibility consultant to select only those tenants who were capable of change.

While many of the documents at my disposal do not reference race, it remained a battleground issue for the CHA that indisputably affected tenant selection. Progressive staff led by Wood prioritized the integration of projects even when met with conflict and violence from city officials and the public alike.⁵⁷ Even though full integration of the projects was never achieved, white flight in the 1960s meant public housing became increasingly nonwhite and

⁵⁶ Mary Wirth, “A Practical Classification of Tenancy”, January 3, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 2].

⁵⁷ D. Bradford Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*.

predominated by single black mothers.⁵⁸ In the early years of public housing, only the most exceptional black households gained access to Chicago's public housing. These were often the families of veterans or stable, working-class African-American families. Even as the tenancy in the high rises began to skew the overall population of Chicago's public housing toward being nonwhite,⁵⁹ the number of black households who gained access to public housing was still disproportionate from the number who were eligible and applied.⁶⁰ As urban renewal displaced thousands of black families, only a fraction of them secured public housing in the 1950s because many new projects were developed in white neighborhoods.⁶¹ There were also barriers to housing black families that were systemic— such as racial covenants and redlining — rather than purely financial.⁶² Taken together, these factors meant that competition was fiercer at the point of selection between black households applying for public housing than it was for white households.⁶³ The CHA could afford to be highly selective for these tenants; so much so, that in many cases the average household income of black families in public housing was considerably higher than that of their white counterparts.^{64,65}

That the CHA displayed hostility toward single black mothers in the later decades of the twentieth century is a well-documented occurrence.⁶⁶ But the fact that the CHA established

⁵⁸ Feldman and Stall, *The Dignity of Resistance*; Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing*.

⁵⁹ Chicago Housing Authority, "Chicago Housing Authority Year Ended December 31, 1967 Highlights of the Operation," December 31, 1967, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 16].

⁶⁰ Leonard Freedman, *Public Housing: The Politics of Poverty* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969); Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*.

⁶¹ Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago, "Report on Site Selection in Public Housing in Chicago," December 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 13]; Fuerst, ed., "Ed Holgren (Interview)," in *When Public Housing Was Paradise*.

⁶² Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York, NY: Liveright, 2017); Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (London, UK: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

⁶³ Freedman, *Public Housing*; Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*.

⁶⁴ L.G. McDougal to Elizabeth Wood (Executive Secretary), "Undesirable Families."

⁶⁵ Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*.

⁶⁶ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (Washington, DC: United States. Dept. of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, January 1, 1965); Feldman and Stall, *The Dignity of Resistance*; Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*; Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing*; Fuerst and Petty, "High-Rise Housing for Low-Income Families."

stricter selection and management policies toward single mothers in the early 1950s — a period where the numbers of single black mothers in public would have been considerably lower — is an unexplored phenomenon. The CHA created these frameworks of scrutiny and surveillance irrespective of the race or ethnicity of the mother. The fact that the CHA’s special attention toward single mothers was clearly gendered, and not necessarily racialized until later, is deserving of exploration to understand the lasting legacy of these policies. This thesis makes the case that the CHA’s policies toward “social problem” tenants posed significant, intentional hardships on single mothers. While CHA documents were evasive with a household’s race, family composition was present in the documentation of tenant selection.⁶⁷ Single mothers were often identified with the terms “unwed mother” or “mother with illegitimate children,” both of which were reflective of the terminology employed by social service providers and the media.⁶⁸

As mentioned before, categorical exclusions of households with certain characteristics were never seriously considered by the CHA. But nevertheless, when discussions of exclusions or strict quotas did occur, they did so in connection to “unwed mothers.” In a statement released by the CHA in 1950, staff emphasized their commitment to upholding the Fourteenth Amendment in the tenant selection process: “families shall not be segregated or otherwise discriminated against on the grounds of race, color or creed, national origin or ancestry.”⁶⁹ The actual results of the CHA’s commitment to non-discrimination have been interrogated by other historians, but their *intention* to enact progressive racial policies is important when contrasted to

⁶⁷ Consistent with my presentation on race earlier, it is acknowledged that while there are overt designations of single motherhood, the intersection of race and gender goes almost entirely unnoticed. At times, the ethnicity or race of a single mother is mentioned but, more often than not, she is just the “unwed mother.”

⁶⁸ Thomas McDade, “Conference on the Problem of Certain Social Characteristics in Agency Families,” January 17, 1950, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 12].

⁶⁹ Chicago Housing Authority, “Manual of Operations: Non-Discrimination Policy,” January 30, 1950, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 12].

their behavior toward single mothers. Discrimination on the basis of gender has not been considered as a shortfall of CHA policy in this era.

The CHA used different lines of logic to justify progressive (though limited) policies toward racial and ethnic minorities. CHA staff were unimpressed by arguments that being a minority automatically corresponded to predispositions toward crime or low standards of living.⁷⁰ The CHA recognized that the large numbers of minorities in the slums was a product of unfair city policies and that residence in the slums bred low qualities, not minority-status itself. This is not to say that a minority household was blameless for its “social problems,” but the CHA exercised caution when attributing blame to patterns of behavior specific to different ethnic groups.⁷¹ For this reason alone, it makes sense that the CHA was hesitant to list the race or ethnicity of tenants in the selection process, as this would have added an unwelcome layer of accountability to their selection.

The same logic did not follow for single mothers. While animus toward ethnic and racial minorities were viewed as misdirected, “unwed mothers” could be blamed for their circumstances because having children out of wedlock was demonstrative of a *pattern* of bad behavior. Multiple studies by the CHA point to a perceived correlation between “unwed mothers” and low standards of living in public housing.⁷² In the first decade of Chicago’s public housing, “unwed mothers” were scattered across the projects. But as slum clearance increased

⁷⁰Mary Wirth, “Confidential: Notes on Mr. Downs’ Comments on Public Housing in Chicago - (Site Selection, etc.),” July 18, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

⁷¹ The CHA was not perfect in this respect, either. See Chicago Housing Authority, IV. Composition of tenancy at Addams and their special problems,” circa 1953-54, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1], *where the author assumes that all Italian-Americans are insular, Puerto Rican and Mexican families have too many children, and “Negro”*

⁷² Office of Director of Management to Elizabeth Wood, Executive Secretary, “The Acceptance of Unmarried Mothers as Tenants in Dearborn Homes,” January 10, 1950, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 13].

their numbers, CHA staff had to reconcile their own stated commitment to housing needy tenants with their moral reservations toward single mothers. In turn, the CHA devised standards of tenant selection that disproportionately challenged the ability of single mothers to gain access to public housing. The CHA had already promised to never indulge in categorical denials of certain tenants — but by making the selection process much more difficult for “unwed mothers,” the CHA asked them to either fundamentally change their way of life or seek housing elsewhere.

The idea of a single mother receiving public benefits was not always a source of antagonism for social workers. Benefits such as the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) subsidy were meant to give much needed assistance to wartime widows. These families were considered deserving victims of circumstance entitled to subsistence from public benefits. Perceptions toward the ADC changed dramatically when it became known that many of those who received ADC subsidies were not the wives of veterans, but families with children born out of wedlock.⁷³ For the CHA’s part, ADC families, or “public assistance families,” could be ideal tenants in that a part of their rent was guaranteed by the federal government each month. But nevertheless, CHA staff were wary of the social baggage that families reliant on public assistance brought to the projects and sought to limit the number of ADC families that they selected for tenancy.⁷⁴

Central to apprehension toward an “unwed mother” was her relationship to her children. Families with children born out of wedlock were a canary in a coalmine for a host of other undesirable, pervasive qualities. “Unwed mothers” were associated with having more children

⁷³ Lauren D. Applebaum, “The Influence of Perceived Deservingness on Policy Decisions Regarding Aid to the Poor,” *Political Psychology* 22, no. 3 (2001): 419–42; Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein, “Work, Welfare, and Single Mothers’ Economic Survival Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 2 (1997): 253–66; Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁷⁴ Mary Wirth, “Memorandum of Record: Public Welfare Services as they affect CHA” March 21, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

than average, which was considered an issue for a number of reasons. There were limited amounts of public housing units large enough to house large families (be it two- or one-parent households).⁷⁵ Though large families often crowded into one- or two-bedroom tenement units in the slums, Chicago's public housing was compliant with city codes that mandated a minimum number of rooms for families of different sizes.⁷⁶ This tightened the number of large families they admitted, disproportionately impacting single mothers. Practicalities of housing them aside, CHA staff such as Wirth questioned the ability of a single mother to love and care for her children in the proper way, *especially* if she had many children. "In this economic group and in this complicated age with the strain of supporting, supervising and giving love and affection to large numbers of children, the chances for a successful family record are very slim."⁷⁷ Finally, a single mother was believed to be incapable of controlling her children; this was a major concern in an era of public housing in which the number of youth exponentially outnumbered adults in almost all projects.⁷⁸ For this reason, the tenant eligibility consultant interrogated applicants about their childrens' behavior, disciplinary record, and school attendance.⁷⁹

High quality of life of children was paramount to the CHA's mission — as the 1950s progressed, families with children were prioritized for public housing. But hypocritically, the CHA hesitated to admit large families headed by single mothers. In many cases, CHA staff

⁷⁵ Rochelle Cole, Relocation Representative to Edward J. Lally, Relocation and Property Management Division, "Narrative Monthly Report for November, 1962," December 4, 1962, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 8].

⁷⁶ L.G. McDougal to Elizabeth Wood (Executive Secretary), "Undesirable Families."

⁷⁷ Mary Wirth, "A Practical Classification of Tenancy", January 3, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 2].

⁷⁸ J.S. Fuerst, ed., "Muriel Chadwick (Interview)," in *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 32–34.

⁷⁹ J.S. Fuerst, ed., "Erman and Dorothy Sing (Interview)," in *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 76–79.

rationalized that public housing was not the right space for intervention for these families.⁸⁰ By denying access to public housing for many single mothers' and barring them from the systems of intervention provided by project management, the CHA sustained their belief that their management of public housing could transform almost any tenant. Thus, the failures of single mothers to change their behavior was not reflective of the CHA's failings as a social work institution, but personal failings of the mother and the larger social work system. This belief prompted several staff to propose that unless the CHA learned to solve the problems of the "clinical poor," these groups should remain in the slums and seek assistance from there.⁸¹

Other undesirable qualities were considered interconnected with single motherhood. As evidenced from the fact that their children (or some of their children) were born out of wedlock, the default assumption was that single mothers were sexually promiscuous and immoral. Sexual promiscuity was sometimes conflated with prostitution, which would be grounds for an automatic denial from public housing or an immediate eviction.⁸² Home visits by CHA staff such as the tenant eligibility consultant were a commonly-used method for recognizing the signs of sexual immorality before a tenant could be offered admission to public housing. In a home visit, a social worker might look for evidence of a "boyfriend,"⁸³ evidence of narcotics or other vices,⁸⁴ or they might even ask to view a woman's marriage certificate (if applicable).⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Mary Wirth, "The real problem reduces itself to what is the Community going to do with the families needing intensive help..." undated, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 17].

⁸¹ Mary Wirth, "Recommendations for the Improvement of Family Living in Public Housing and Summary of Recommendations for the Improvement of Low-Cost Housing," undated, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 17].

⁸² L.G. McDougal to Elizabeth Wood (Executive Secretary), "Undesirable Families."

⁸³ Fuerst, "Social Problem Families; Speech Given in Buffalo."

⁸⁴ Mary Wirth, "Attached is a review of the problem situations," August 1962, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 4].

⁸⁵ Tenant Relocation Bureau, "Notes on the Efforts of the TRB to Relocate the Robert Davis Family from 5335 Lake Park Ave," August 23, 1960, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 10]; Diane Brewington (Field Representative) & Beverly Morgan (CHA Specialist) to E.J. Lally (Chief of Relocation and Property

Sometimes, single mothers were able to change their situation to better situate themselves for admission. In a majority of cases, this entailed improving their housekeeping in between home visits. But in at least two recorded cases, Wirth (as a consultant for the Department of Urban Renewal) and other social workers instructed women to marry the errant fathers of their children to increase the families' chance of getting accepted into public housing.⁸⁶ In other cases, a mother needed to prove that she was formally divorced from her husband so that she could justify a current relationship and enhance her eligibility for public housing.⁸⁷ Even though illegitimacy was not always an automatic disqualifier for single mothers — as they could still receive “Best” or “Better” classifications — they needed to excel in every other category (such as by good housekeeping and well-behaved children) to gain admission to public housing.⁸⁸

The most common review criteria cited against single mothers were charges of “bad housekeeping.” Home visits conducted during the selection process led social workers to evaluate housekeeping — cleanliness of the home, behavior of children, absence of vices such as drugs, alcohol, suitors, etc. — to determine the fit of a single-mother household for public housing. According to the tenant classifications provided earlier, conspicuous “dirt and squalor” in the home would lead to a “Bad” classification and a failure to recommend a tenant.⁸⁹ While firm housekeeping standards is justifiable for an agency whose service is providing housing to

Management), “Monthly Narrative Report: Parcel 4-145 Project 6C,” January 11, 1963, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 10], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁸⁶ Arthurrene Craddock (Relocation Representative) to E.J. Lally (Chief of Relocation Management), “Narrative Report - November,” January 9, 1963, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 4]; J. McCoy (Relocation - 28th St. Site Office) to E.J. Lally (Chief of Relocation Management), “Narrative Report: A Relocation Workers [sic] Dream Case,” January 14, 1963, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 4].

⁸⁷ Department of Urban Renewal, “Notes on the Efforts of the TRB [Tenant Relocation Bureau] To Relocate the Robert David Family; Mary Wirth, “Notes on the Relocation Problems with the Orr Family,” September 1960, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 11].

⁸⁸ Mary Wirth, “A Practical Classification of Tenancy,” January 3, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 2].

⁸⁹ Mary Wirth, “A Practical Classification of Tenancy,” January 3, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 2].

low-income families, I highlight this category of judgement to argue that this standard was inherently gendered and posed an undue burden on single mothers. Heightened, middle-class expectations of an orderly home a secondary concern for women living in slum housing, if not altogether a foreign concept. Stricter selection policies against single mothers meant that only a portion of their growing population gained access to these educational resources.

Overwhelmingly, the CHA understood “unwed motherhood” to be an irreversible “social problem” that only extreme intervention could mitigate. Perhaps the greatest paradox of all is that despite the abundance of reasons given by the CHA to effectively exclude “unwed mothers,” hundreds still gained access to public housing and were given ample resources and strict guidance to alter their behaviors. Even though “unwed mothers” were rebuked by mainstream society,⁹⁰ the CHA begrudgingly accepted a portion of their growing population. But the CHA faced an ideological undoing by allowing many “unwed mothers” into public housing — what social work interventions could change the error of illegitimacy, a permanent mark which stopped a woman in this period from reaching her full potential as a middle-class homemaker?

To conclude, the admission measures devised by the CHA produced substantial barrier for single mothers seeking admission to public housing. Even though having children meant that they should have been prioritized, the reality was that CHA selection policies held them to a much higher standard than other “social problem” tenants. Discrimination against single mothers in the selection process can be understood separately from the selection politics that regulated race. Rather, overt scrutiny of single mothers was a result of deeply rooted notions of class and domesticity held by CHA staff.

⁹⁰ Norma Lee Browning, “Illegitimate Babies Cost You Plenty!,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 15, 1959.

II. Tenant Management: Housekeeping as a Measure for “Middle-Class Orientations”⁹¹

“In a home visit you checked under the bed, and you’d expect that there might be today’s or yesterday’s debris under there, but if it was last week’s we didn’t want them. Ideally, we wanted a complete family — father and mother in the home. It was impossible to achieve in every case...”⁹²

- Tom McDade, Project Manager from 1947 to 1952

Scrutiny of tenants’ lifestyles did not end after admission to public housing — the CHA had a number of expectations for those tenants fortunate enough to be selected. If anything, the scrutiny increased after admission. Once tenants were admitted to a CHA project, they not only dealt with the CHA’s constant observation but stringent regulations as well. A few of the methods used by the CHA to monitor tenants overlapped with the methods used to adjudicate households in the selection pool — namely the use of home visits. The “social problem” vocabulary was also employed with tenants, though the CHA’s responses to problems in the projects were much interventionist in nature.

This section will briefly highlight the role that project managers played in implementing the CHA’s social work agenda, as their on-the-ground work put them in direct contact with “social problem” families. Next, it will examine how the CHA’s optimistic vision for a transformative tenancy in public housing was challenged by external and internal forces during this era. And amid the innumerable “social problems” that CHA staff and project managers

⁹¹ J. S. Fuerst, ed., “Winston Kennedy (Interview),” in *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 28.

⁹² J. S. Fuerst, ed., “Tom McDade (Interview),” in *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 23.

contended with on a daily basis, single mothers were identified as a threat to their operation. Interventions in single-mother households will be considered, both in their similarities to and divergences from standard social re-engineering procedures.

The bureaucratic structures of the CHA in this period are complex, but for the purposes of this section there are only two divisions that are important: staff in the Office of the Executive Secretary (hereby referred to as “executive CHA staff”) and management staff (“project managers”). While executive CHA staff handled planning and the strategy, management staff were the ones who actually carried out these directives at the projects.⁹³

The autonomy of project managers is important to note, as it is through their professional lenses that tenant management policies flowed. This phenomenon is described by Michael Lipsky’s theory of the “street-level bureaucrat,” a public servant responsible for implementing policies by interacting directly with constituents.⁹⁴ “Street-level bureaucrats”⁹⁵ are well-informed of the issues facing their constituents, but they do not always have the authority to act outside the established policies. But regardless of what their denoted powers are, many “street-level bureaucrats” are able to act according to their own judgement simply because they operate without total supervision. This was the case for many project managers at the CHA.

For example, Oscar C. Brown, Jr. (the first manager of the Ida B. Wells Homes in 1941) described the disconnect between the realities of managing tenants on the ground and the expectations of executive CHA staff. In an oral history, Brown claimed that management

⁹³ Lloyd J. Mendelson, “The Chicago Housing Authority An Administrative Study” (Dissertation, M.A. in Political Science, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago, 1948), Mansueto Library.

⁹⁴ Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service, 30th Anniversary Expanded Edition* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980).

⁹⁵ He developed his theory based on the experiences of public school teachers and police officers, but it has been applied to a number of professions.

“wasn’t a social services operation, it was a commonsense operation.”⁹⁶ Though the CHA instructed Brown to speak to tenants individually about the standards for living in the project, Brown instead established a more colloquial relationship with his tenants by addressing them as a group. This example describes a minor departure from CHA policy, but shows that the door was open for project managers to apply their own judgement to interactions with tenants.

Cooperation from managers was key to executive CHA staffs’ formation of tenant management strategies.⁹⁷ Executive CHA staff recognized that for many tenants — especially those who originated from “slums” — public housing would be their first time living in a decent structure and organized community. In an ideal world, tenants would voluntarily seek out these resources due to an independent “desire” to improve their situation.⁹⁸ This was the philosophy of housing activist Edith Abbott, who believed that removing a tenant from a blighted area and giving them a good home was enough to fundamentally change their lifestyle.⁹⁹ This assumes that a person’s environment alone determines their behavior — therefore, affordable and decent housing was the only prescriptive measure required for intervention.¹⁰⁰ By the 1950s, CHA staff understood that public housing on its own would not be enough for families with multiple and systemic “social problems.” Proactive social work intervention would be required, especially in situations where tenants were averse to change.

⁹⁶ J. S. Fuerst, ed., “Oscar C. Brown, Sr. (Interview),” in *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 11.

⁹⁷ In the early days of public housing, managers were required to live in the projects where they worked. This verified the quality of the homes and lent legitimacy to project living. See Wood, *The Beautiful Beginnings The Failure to Learn*; Fuerst, ed., “Tom McDade (Interview),” in *When Public Housing Was Paradise*.

⁹⁸ Mary Wirth, “Report of Community and Tenant Relations on the Plan to Control Acceptable Behavior of Public Housing Residents,” February 28, 1957, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

⁹⁹ Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Preston Breckinridge, *The Tenements of Chicago, 1908-1935* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1936).

¹⁰⁰ This conclusion was likely drawn based on the experiences of tenants in turn-of-the-century settlement houses and wartime public housing, a period where selection for subsidized housing was at its most exclusive.

But why did it matter to CHA staff that tenants in public housing improve themselves? There are a handful of possible reasons. For one, CHA staff referred to public housing as an “opportunity”¹⁰¹ which should be granted to those who stood to “benefit”¹⁰² from or “make constructive use”¹⁰³ of public housing. This rhetoric implies that the purpose of public housing was never just physical housing, but rather a site where social workers could administer a number of New-Deal styled services to the urban poor. With these resources at the CHA’s disposal, and with a captive audience (so to speak) of tenants, CHA staff would have expected tenants to take full advantage of these resources and improve their station.

The construction of the CHA’s social reform framework also came from their intention for public housing to provide only temporary housing. Public housing was initially created to render housing relief in the wake of the Great Depression, allowing tenants to get back on their feet and afford private-market housing. As two project managers recalled, “the principle [of] public housing [was] enabling families to graduate from subsidized housing”¹⁰⁴ and to fulfill the ““temporary needs”” of tenants.¹⁰⁵ More than just being able to afford to rent or own a market-rate abode, the CHA wanted to prepare tenants to enter the middle class. Tenants were encouraged to garden, keep clean homes, manage their finances, and engage in community activities (a so-called “middle-class orientation”).¹⁰⁶ All of these skills would equip tenants to be self-sufficient upon leaving public housing, either voluntarily or once a household’s income

¹⁰¹ Mary Wirth, “A Practical Classification of Tenancy”, January 3, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 2].

¹⁰² Mary Wirth, “A Practical Classification of Tenancy”, January 3, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 2].

¹⁰³ Jack L. Wank, “Meeting of the Community and Tenant Relations Division,” June 20, 1957.

¹⁰⁴ J. S. Fuerst, ed., “Tom McDade (Interview),” in *When Public Housing Was Paradise*.

¹⁰⁵ Fuerst, ed., “Winston Kennedy (Interview),” in *When Public Housing Was Paradise*.

¹⁰⁶ Fuerst, ed., “Winston Kennedy (Interview),” in *When Public Housing Was Paradise*.

inevitably became too high.¹⁰⁷ Only for those families with disabilities or other extenuating circumstances should public housing have been a permanent housing solution.¹⁰⁸

But as more and more families with complex “social problems” were admitted into public housing, CHA staff were at a loss as to how they could feasibly prepare them for a middle-class lifestyle (or if these tenants even desired this outcome). The CHA still committed itself to improving its tenants, though their mission was now decidedly lacking in direction. Yes, the immediate rewards of socially re-engineering tenants was that the projects would be orderly and appealing. But if tenants were not motivated to independently improve and seek a higher station, then what was the CHA hoping to achieve beyond housing Chicago’s poor? CHA staff grappled with these ideological questions as they developed interventionist management procedures.

Thorough tenant selection procedures in the 1950s meant that project managers were provided with ample information on the “social problems” of tenants. When applicable, the tenant eligibility consultant made applicants aware their selection was conditional on their improvement and good behavior. Tenants who were amenable to this caveat were more likely to be admitted.¹⁰⁹ The CHA staff had once hoped that the consultant’s enhanced screening alone might lead to an instantaneous adjustment for tenants upon entering public housing. But instead, project managers reported that they “now find it necessary to achieve through coercive measures and financial penalties the same quality of housekeeping and lawn care which formerly sprang instantaneously from the initiative of the tenants.”¹¹⁰ Executive CHA staff attempted to resolve

¹⁰⁷ And if a family was taking full advantage of the opportunity offered by public housing, their income should have increased to the point of disqualification from public housing.

¹⁰⁸ The CHA was especially accommodating toward seniors, who were expected to age-in-place in public housing.

¹⁰⁹ Mary Wirth, “Answers Given to Questions from NAHRO on Report (with consultation from Mr. Masters), March 15, 1957, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

¹¹⁰ Claude P. Miller, Robert Neuwirth, and Robert H. Murphy, “The Housing Managers’ Proposals for Community and Tenant Relations,” June 11, 1958, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 13].

this challenge by telling project managers to take a more active role in the lives of tenants, based on both the tenant profiles they received from the consultant¹¹¹ as well as their own observations.¹¹² Executive CHA staff could provide project managers with social work expertise — strategies — to solve tenant’s “social problems,” but only after the project managers identified what those issues were.

One way that project managers could observe tenants and diagnose the “root” of their problems was to conduct home visits.¹¹³ The purpose of home visits were twofold: to ensure that the housing units themselves remained in good condition and that the residents were engaging in behavior endorsed by the CHA. Borrowing from the methods used by the tenant eligibility consultant, project managers conducted home visits at either a random or scheduled time. Project managers were instructed to visit new tenants at least once within their first three months at the project to see how the tenant was adjusting (an “Introductory Visit”) and then at least once again every year (“Annual Visit”).¹¹⁴ If a tenant’s housekeeping was bad, “the family would be revisited at stated intervals until definite improvement [was] shown” (“Interim Visit”).¹¹⁵

To the CHA, bad housekeeping meant increased maintenance costs, the creation of health problems, and harm to the “social well-being of the project community.”¹¹⁶ The CHA associated bad housekeeping with “slum dwelling,” so an adoption of good housekeeping came to represent

¹¹¹ And if not from the consultant, then from another executive CHA staff member in the Community and Tenant Relations division.

¹¹² Mary Wirth, “Answers Given to Questions from NAHRO on Report (with consultation from Mr. Masters), March 15, 1957, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

¹¹³ J. S. Fuerst, ed., “Leon Hamilton (Interview),” in *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 52–57.

¹¹⁴ Chicago Housing Authority, “Section 4840: Management — Tenant Relations” April 30, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 13].

¹¹⁵ Chicago Housing Authority, “Section 4840” April 30, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 13].

¹¹⁶ Jack L. Wank, “Pilot Study at Grace Abbott Homes to Develop and Test Methods and Procedures to Reduce Maintenance Costs, and Increase Tenant Cooperation, through Raising Living Standards in the Project Community,” March 20, 1957, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 15].

a symbolic departure from the urban “slums” from which many tenants originated. Though the CHA was aware that poor housekeeping would be an issue for many families relocating from blighted areas, tenants were expected to work hard to improve themselves, even if the process was slow: “[the relocated tenants] can learn to live differently and will appreciate the opportunity eventually.”¹¹⁷ And though not every tenant was on track to complete their middle-class orientation and graduate from public housing, Wirth commented that after a while “families...unlearn[ed] their lifetime habits of slovenliness and bad housekeeping.”¹¹⁸

It is unclear whether there were standardized guidelines followed by project managers to adjudicate the success of a home visit. There are limited records of the home visits themselves in the Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, although several oral histories from this era hint at the nature of the procedures. One project manager, Tom McDade, rationalized that, “In a home visit you checked under the bed, and you’d expect that there might be today’s or yesterday’s debris under there, but if it was last week’s we [CHA staff] didn’t want them.”¹¹⁹ While this remark is likely intended to be frivolous, McDade’s overall tone in throughout interview indicates that he was confident in his ability to quickly judge a household. In a home visit, this might mean doing something as arbitrary as checking under furniture to determine whether or not a household would receive ongoing surveillance. The power given to project managers in home visits was therefore substantial: the ability to determine their own standards of housekeeping.

¹¹⁷ Mary Wirth, “Report to Management,” October 1953, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

¹¹⁸ Mary Wirth, “There are three suggestions I should like to make for improving the appearance of the Cabrini Homes...” August 22, 1955, [Box 1, Folder 1], Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

¹¹⁹ Fuerst, “When Public Housing Was Paradise,” 2003.

Consequences for repeated evaluations of poor housekeeping or failure to cooperate with CHA staff could result in a cancellation of a tenant's lease, though "[v]ery few ever arrive[d] at this stage."¹²⁰ Whether a tenant was amenable to instruction from CHA staff or remained stubbornly opposed to the home visits, Wirth found that the collective efficacy of the projects encouraged tenants to improve their housekeeping. Tenants were often driven to improve their housekeeping both to gain the praise of their neighbors or to avoid their disdain.¹²¹ Repeated "Interim" home visits, while intrusive, were highly effective at encouraging better housekeeping, as demonstrated in a study of both Grace Abbott¹²² and Cabrini Green Homes.¹²³

Housekeeping evaluations were also entrenched in gendered ideas of homemaking. The CHA partnered with a "Home Economics Consultant" to provide counselling and lessons to train women in the responsibilities of keeping an orderly home — a decidedly middle-class practice.¹²⁴ Given the difference in social class between social workers and tenants in public housing, the housekeeping instruction begins to parallel theories of "domestic imperialism,"¹²⁵ wherein white women throughout history have imposed Western values of domesticity on subordinate¹²⁶ populations of women. Whether or not the CHA should have prioritized teaching homemaking (of all things) to women in public housing, this intervention is consistent with the CHA's goal to institute a middle-class orientation. Disregarding the sociological implications of the gendered expectations for housekeeping, the narrative put forth by these archival documents

¹²⁰ Wirth, "There are three suggestions I should like to make..."

¹²¹ Wirth, "There are three suggestions I should like to make..."

¹²² Jack L. Wank, "Pilot Study at Grace Abbott Homes," March 20, 1957, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 15].

¹²³ Wirth, "There are three suggestions I should like to make..."

¹²⁴ Chicago Housing Authority, "Chicago Housing Authority Year Ended December 31, 1967 Highlights of the Operation."

¹²⁵ Jane E. Simonsen, *Making Home Work: Domesticity and Native American Assimilation in the American West, 1860-1919* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

¹²⁶ Examples of domestic imperialism are found at "contact zones" between two populations, where the more dominant population imposes their culture on a subordinate population.

and oral histories is one of hope and improvement — under the direction of CHA staff, many households learned to manage the responsibilities of their home and children.

Though “Introductory” and “Annual” home visits were applied universally to all tenants, “Interim” home visits could be selectively applied. Even though Wirth said that “Interim” home visits should only occur if there was a demonstration of bad housekeeping, there were a few noteworthy instances in which home visits were applied subjectively. In 1950, the CHA conducted a study of the homes of all of the single mothers in Dearborn Homes, a brand new segregated African-American project consisting of many high-rises).¹²⁷ The CHA justified the study after they received high numbers of complaints from managers about various problems occurring at Dearborn Homes. Though many of the complaints were unrelated to the behavior of “unwed mothers” or undisciplined children (many were actually related to maintenance issues), the sheer quantity of problems, coupled with several “rumors,” were enough to elicit an investigation by the CHA.¹²⁸ Recognizing that Dearborn Homes had a “high frequency” of single mothers, the CHA sought to establish “unwed mothers” as the *cause* of the host of other issues facing the project.¹²⁹ However, the investigation was inconclusive: “whether the problem of unwed mothers creates overt or latent difficulties at the project it would seem, in any case, that the situation must be met with much closer supervision.”¹³⁰¹³¹

¹²⁷ Office of Director of Management to Elizabeth Wood, Executive Secretary, “The Acceptance of Unmarried Mothers as Tenants in Dearborn Homes,” January 10, 1950, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 13], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

¹²⁸ Office of Director of Management to Elizabeth Wood, Executive Secretary, “The Acceptance of Unmarried Mothers as Tenants in Dearborn Homes,” January 10, 1950, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 13], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

¹²⁹ Thomas McDade, “Conference on the Problem of Certain Social Characteristics in Agency Families,” January 17, 1950, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 12], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

¹³⁰ Office of Director of Management to Elizabeth Wood, Executive Secretary, “The Acceptance of Unmarried Mothers as Tenants in Dearborn Homes,” January 10, 1950, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 13], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

¹³¹ A study conducted at Grace Abbott Homes in 1957 found that the best correlative factor for “social problems” in a tenant was the “project operating costs,” or the amount that the CHA spent to maintain a project. Logically, these costs could be reduced and

“Closer supervision” was actualized through a series of studies of the population of single mothers at Dearborn Homes. Despite the lack of success of the first, the CHA realized it could use this population to answer other questions related to the tenancy of single mothers. Later that same month, CHA staff visited 13 single-mother households.¹³² The home visits were arranged strategically — all of them were a surprise, and all of them were conducted in the afternoon. Babette Stiefel notes that “the time is significant because in the normal routine of housekeeping, the apartments should have been in good order.”¹³³ The report found that in most of the homes, the housekeeping was “very bad” and that in several homes there was evidence of sexual “solicitations” by the mothers. These findings alarmed CHA staff and led to an immediate, coordinated response. Luckily, CHA staff found that single mothers at Dearborn Homes were very receptive to intervention. To address poor housekeeping, CHA staff with backgrounds in social work provided cleanliness and housekeeping lessons. But because the single mothers were guarded about “the matter of solicitation,” Babette Stiefel notes that their apartments were monitored and rumors “track[ed] down.”¹³⁴

Outside of the documents pertaining to the investigative home visits at Dearborn Homes, there are no other documents about home visits of CHA tenants that are concerned with the sexual behaviors of “social problem” households. By all accounts, this scrutiny was reserved for households headed by single mothers. Stiefel does not indicate why it is important that the CHA determine whether or not the women were engaging with men — would they face eviction or

the community improved if the tenants took an active role in keeping the project safe and orderly. *See* Jack L. Wank, “Pilot Study at Grace Abbott Homes to Develop and Test Methods and Procedures to Reduce Maintenance Costs, and Increase Tenant Cooperation, through Raising Living Standards in the Project Community,” March 20, 1957, [Box 1, Folder 15], Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

¹³² Babette Stiefel to Mr. Winning, Office of Director of Management, “Report on Home Visits to Unmarried Mothers at Dearborn Homes,” January 23, 1950, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 12], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

¹³³ Babette Stiefel to Mr. Winning, “Report on Home Visits to Unmarried Mothers at Dearborn Homes.”

¹³⁴ Babette Stiefel to Mr. Winning, “Report on Home Visits to Unmarried Mothers at Dearborn Homes.”

other consequences if it were so? — though this probe is consistent with CHA staff's fixation on the suspected immorality of single mother households.

There are other characterizations of single-mother households that run counter to those put forth by the CHA's research. Oral histories from tenants in single-mother households in the 1950s and 1960s describe how many single mothers worked full-time jobs that conflicted with their ability to watch their children or manage the responsibilities of their home.¹³⁵ This fact was not considered by CHA staff in the Dearborn Homes studies, likely because they associated single motherhood with unemployment and welfare dependency. Though many single mothers on ADC or other welfare subsidies did not work full-time, the CHA's imposition caused unreasonably strict standards for all single mothers. Another tenant from Cabrini-Green Homes recalled that sexual abuse against unmarried women was common in the projects — the abuser was often another tenant or even custodial staff.¹³⁶ Though the CHA portrayed single mothers as the perpetrators of irresponsible and sexually behavior, the reality was that many single women were vulnerable to sexual and domestic violence.¹³⁷ And it is not coincidental that all of the public housing projects¹³⁸ selected for investigative studies predominantly housed African Americans. This double-standard for policing consensual relationships while failing to provide adequate security from violence demonstrates the dangers faced by black, single mothers.

In tenant selection, CHA staff strove to be proactive in selecting only those single-mother households who showed a propensity for stable living. But tenant management was necessarily

¹³⁵ Audrey Petty, ed., "Paula Hawkins (Interview)," in *High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing* (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney's, 2013), 125–40.

¹³⁶ Audrey Petty, ed., "Yusufu Mosley (Interview)," in *High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing* (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney's, 2013), 81–96.

¹³⁷ The here is evidence provided in the next section of the thesis that shows that some tenants were evicted for committing rape, these totals paled in comparison to the amount of tenants evicted for "suspected immorality" and "illegitimacy."

¹³⁸ As a reminder: Dearborn Homes, Grace Abbott Homes, and Cabrini-Green Homes.

reactive. Once a single-mother household was admitted to public housing, the CHA inherited its “social problems” until a prescriptive solution could be found. Status as a single mother led to profiling and surveillance that was far beyond what was expected for public housing tenants. By the 1970s, the CHA’s prescriptive, social service model became overwhelmed.¹³⁹ Tenants reported that social services were “practically non-existent” — gone were employment counseling, financial literacy, and housekeeping resources.¹⁴⁰ Only child care services remained, but even these were overused and insubstantial.¹⁴¹ Even more crippling for the CHA’s mission was the fact that public housing was increasingly becoming the permanent, multigenerational residences for poor families. The CHA’s mission to create a pipeline from the “slums” to the middle-class had collapsed, in spite of the ambitions of CHA staff.

The story of tenant management in this period was always one of tribulation and frustration. As the examples provided in this section demonstrate, home visits and social service amenities kept many tenants occupied. However, there were cases in which intervention and discipline did not reach satisfactory results. In these cases, managers appealed to executive CHA staff for a different, final form of relief — tenant removal. The final section of this thesis will examine how and why the CHA evicted “social problem” tenants — and how these evictions were reflective of the ideological changes undergone by the CHA in this period.

¹³⁹ Mary Wirth to Mr. Harry J. Schneider, Director of Management, “Housekeeping Inspection at Ickes,” September 21, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

¹⁴⁰ Alphanette White Price, “A Survey of Differences in Services in Chicago Housing Authority Developments” (Dissertation, M.A. in History, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago, 1970), 8, Mansueto Library.

¹⁴¹ Audrey Petty, ed., “Paula Hawkins (Interview),” in *High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing* (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney’s, 2013), 125–40.

III. Tenant Removal: “Ivory Notices” and the Notion of Failure

“...it is generally understood that eviction [for undesirability] is the last resort when it is agreed that the family is not profiting from public housing and in the interest of the operation they must be eliminated.”¹⁴²

- Mary Wirth, 1956

In the initial decades of the CHA’s operation, the eviction of tenants from public housing was viewed as a necessary evil which should be avoided at all costs. Though a majority of evictions were the result of a tenant’s failure to pay rent,¹⁴³ other reasons for eviction were less material and more subjective. As shown in this paper, the CHA was determined to admit only those tenants who had model qualities or demonstrated an ability to change. To this extent, CHA staff were still prepared to evict wayward tenants who resisted management interventions, though they believed removal should only be instigated in dire situations. But primary sources from the Tenant and Community Relations division indicate that these situations did arise. This section will provide an overview of the legal history for “Ivory Notices” and their application by the CHA. Next, an analysis of gendered causes for Ivory evictions will consider how and why the CHA might have removed households headed by single women. And finally, the physical and ideological consequences of eviction — for both tenants and CHA staff — will be considered.

“Ivory Notices” were an integral tool for the swift and efficient eviction of tenants from CHA housing. References to “Ivory Notices” appear intermittently in the Wirth archive and

¹⁴² Mary Wirth, “Confidential,” July 9, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

¹⁴³ Chicago Housing Authority, “Chicago Housing Authority Year Ended,” December 31, 1967, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 16].

throughout Fuerst's publications, though no other historical record has examined them before. The most robust mention of Ivory Notices appears in Fuerst's "Social Problem Families" speech.¹⁴⁴ Fuerst briefly touches on the situation which precipitated the use of Ivory Notices, their functionality, and their origin: when the CHA faced a growing number of "social problem" families that posed issues which necessitated their removal, it became clear that the tenants could not be evicted in "the usual way".¹⁴⁵ Even when tenants were given notice of their eviction, many would protest these orders and refuse to leave. Fuerst provides an anecdote of a tenant who responded to her notice of eviction by writing a curt letter, "'Dear Miss Wood: I remain.'"¹⁴⁶ CHA staff were frustrated to learn that federal housing regulations made the process of evicting problem tenants lengthy and tedious, even if they succeeded in codifying tenants' rights — as with evictions from housing in the private market, public housing tenants required advanced notice of their eviction, the CHA needed to provide cause for the eviction, and tenants had a right to contest their evictions in court. This meant that the CHA often failed to recover possession of the housing units for months after an eviction was filed, even as the waiting list for access to public housing rapidly increased as a result of urban renewal.

To remedy this, the CHA changed its guidelines between 1949-1950 to include a fast-tracked eviction process for problem tenants. These evictions were issued by dispensing a household with an "Ivory Notice" for immediate eviction. Not every eviction was an Ivory eviction. Fuerst's speech reduces the origin of this removal system to one line: "The Authority

¹⁴⁴ I connected references of "Ivory Notices" to line in an oral history regarding "*CHA v. Ivory*." From here, I consulted a number of online sources but found nothing. After speaking with Dr. Hunt and a librarian at the University of Chicago Law School, I obtained a ruling number and received a hard copy of the ruling from the First District Appellate Court Clerk's Office in Chicago.

¹⁴⁵ Fuerst, "Social Problem Families; Speech Given in Buffalo."

¹⁴⁶ Fuerst, "Social Problem Families; Speech Given in Buffalo."

then worked out a procedure for their eviction, which was upheld by the courts”.¹⁴⁷ Fuerst is referring to the ruling in the 1950 case *Chicago Housing Authority v. Elizabeth Ivory* (*CHA v. Ivory*), which was decided in favor of the CHA. Existing scholarship on the origin of the “Ivory Notice” is scarce — this is possibly because the ruling was negated by HUD in 1967¹⁴⁸ and because the application of Ivory Notices was never extreme.¹⁴⁹ Even in the decades following the *CHA v. Ivory* ruling, CHA staff were unclear about the actual details of the case and the ruling, though they wholeheartedly adopted the resulting Ivory eviction system.¹⁵⁰ But by acquiring the requisite court records and synthesizing information from several sources, I have compiled a brief history of Ivory Notices and how they informed the CHA’s approach to tenant removal.

On July 20, 1950, the Illinois Appellate Court entered a decision in the *CHA v. Ivory* case. Ivory was a month-to-month tenant of Ida B. Wells Homes who refused to vacate her unit when given an order for the termination of her lease by the CHA. Little can be found on who the named plaintiff in the case was — it can be deduced that Ivory was a black woman (as Ida B. Wells Homes were constructed to solely house African Americans),¹⁵¹ but the mystery of her identity becomes secondary to the impact of the decision itself. Sometime between 1949-1950, she filed suit against the CHA for forcible entry and detainer, presumably in response to CHA managements’ attempts to physically remove her or her belongings from the unit. When she challenged her eviction, the Municipal Court of Chicago actually ruled in her favor. But when the CHA appealed the case to the Illinois First District Appellate Court, Ivory’s petition was

¹⁴⁷ *Chicago Housing Authority v. Elizabeth Ivory*, 341 Ray Smith 282 (Appellate Courts of Illinois 1950).

¹⁴⁸ J. S. Fuerst, *When Public Housing Was Paradise*, footnotes.

¹⁴⁹ When I spoke to Dr. Hunt about my interest in acquiring the court decision for *CHA v. Ivory*, he responded that there was “not much” to the case. However, I found the ruling to be incredibly informative for the subject matter of my thesis.

¹⁵⁰ See, Mary Wirth, “Those Ivory Notices,” circa 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 8], where Wirth guesses that the decision was made by the “Illinois Superior (?) Court” and that, “as far as I [Wirth] can tell”, the name Ivory came from the name of the offending family.

¹⁵¹ Fuerst, ed., “Oscar C. Brown, Sr. (Interview),” in *When Public Housing Was Paradise*; Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*.

denied and a decision was brought that had a lasting impact on the way that the CHA was able to remove problem tenants.

The lower court found that in order to evict a tenant, a state or local housing authority must “set forth one of the specific grounds for eviction” listed in section 825.6 of the Federal Rent Regulations found in the Housing Act of 1949.¹⁵² The CHA countered that section 825.6 (g) allowed exemptions for proceeding in the eviction and recovering possession “where such action or proceeding is authorized by statute or regulations under which such accommodations are administered”. Presiding Justice John Schwartz¹⁵³ was satisfied by the CHA’s argument and found that a “public agency of the character of the [CHA] is exempt from federal rent control”.¹⁵⁴ This was consistent with rulings between housing providers and tenants in several other cities¹⁵⁵ and fundamentally changed the power of CHA staff to evict tenants at their discretion and with minimal legal oversight.¹⁵⁶

The material provided in the ruling is sparse and leaves many questions unanswered: Who was Elizabeth Ivory? Was she married or a single parent with children? Why did the CHA move to evict her? Though the Appellate decision was brief, the result of this case for the CHA was far reaching. Named for the plaintiff in the case, “Ivory Notices” allowed the CHA to evict tenants on a faster timeline because the CHA was no longer required to provide evidence for the cause of a tenant’s eviction and tenants were not able to contest their eviction in court. This was a major win for CHA staff who feared that frequent challenges in the court system would result

¹⁵² *Chicago Housing Authority v. Elizabeth Ivory*, 341 Ray Smith 282 (Appellate Courts of Illinois 1950).

¹⁵³ Megan Graydon, “John Schwartz, 1925-2011,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 4, 2011.

¹⁵⁴ *Chicago Housing Authority v. Elizabeth Ivory*, 341 Ray Smith 282 (Appellate Courts of Illinois 1950).

¹⁵⁵ See *Medical Center Commission v. Salaway*, 334 Ill. App. 78; *City of New York v. Salod*, 76 N.Y.S. (2d) 306; *City of Sioux Falls v. Sona*, 35 N.W. (2d) 296; *San Diego State College Foundation v. Hasty*, 202 P. (2d) 868; *Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority v. Simpson*, 85 N.E. (2d) 560.

¹⁵⁶ Fuerst, *When Public Housing Was Paradise*, 2003.

in greater outside scrutiny toward their operations.¹⁵⁷ For example, several Chicago newspapers tracked the class actions filed against the CHA by tenants who were evicted because the CHA lowered the income-ceiling for public housing tenancy, thus making many working-class families ineligible.^{158,159} This negative coverage was harmful for the CHA, as Wood's senior staff were already facing pressure from the mayor, aldermen, and public in regard to public housing site selection. In both cases, the headlines were hostile toward the CHA and its mission.

Accordingly, not all evictions qualified as Ivory evictions; tenants who failed to pay rent or provided false information about family income were subject to a traditional eviction procedure.¹⁶⁰ The CHA recognized that the Appellate Court's decision set an immensely powerful legal precedent. But CHA staff were hesitant to wantonly issue "Ivory Notices". As summarized by Fuerst, "[R]ecognizing the danger of such a tool, we are loathe to use ["Ivory Notices"], even on families such as these."¹⁶¹ So while the CHA claimed that formal evictions were rare (excluding informal evictions, where families "chose" to leave, which were actually very common),¹⁶² Ivory evictions were rarer still. However, was the hesitation of Fuerst and Wood-era CHA staffers to invoke Ivory evictions reflected by later CHA staff? "Ivory Notices" were a formidable mechanism for quietly removing tenants which easily could have been wielded by passive, less idealistic CHA staff. Unfortunately it is impossible to know because the

¹⁵⁷ See Mary Wirth, "Re: Pauline Lyons letter of complaint to General Kean," October 11, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1], *where an evicted tenant threatens to tell her story to the newspaper, forcing the CHA to direct resources toward appeasing her*.

¹⁵⁸ "U.S. Action May Avert 1,600 CHA Evictions Here," July 20, 1947, *The Chicago Daily Tribune*; "Court Warns Tenants in CHA Ouster Suit to Pay Up to \$24,000 in Rent," February 18, 1949, *The Chicago Daily Tribune*; "Only 7 Find Homes as CHA Evicts 31," March 30, 1950, *The Chicago Daily Tribune*.

¹⁵⁹ The newspaper coverage was torn between expressing sympathy for the upper-income tenants as well as frustration that tenants earning higher incomes should still seek public assistance, which came from taxpayers. In either case, the headlines were belligerent toward the CHA and its mission. See "You Pay His Rent," October 15, 1948, *The Chicago Daily Tribune*.

¹⁶⁰ Mary Wirth, "Confidential," July 9, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

¹⁶¹ Fuerst, "Social Problem Families; Speech Given in Buffalo."

¹⁶² Chicago Housing Authority, "Chicago Housing Authority Year Ended," December 31, 1967, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 16].

historical footprint of Ivory evictions (and public housing evictions, generally) in the 1950s and 1960s is scant.

So which families were ultimately subject to Ivory removals? Records and the details of individual Ivory evictions are scarce, but documents do reference their infrequent application throughout the 1950s. A few documents of Wirth deal with “Ivory Notices” directly. For Wirth’s part, the immediate impact of the *CHA v. Ivory* decision occurred before her employment. Though Wirth entered the scene roughly three years after the beginning of Ivory evictions, it was not until 1956 that she took an interest in the distribution of “Ivory Notices” across the projects. Wirth was surprised to learn that there was no centralized record of “Ivory Notices”. To remedy this, she completed an audit of all requests made by project managers for Ivory evictions — including the reasons for eviction and the projects the tenants belonged to — which occurred between January 1955 and July 1956. In this eighteen-month period, 121 “Ivory Notices” were issued. Of these, twelve were rejected by the CHA because they did not fit the criteria of an Ivory eviction and four were cancelled based on “improvement or change in situation.”¹⁶³ Wirth rationalized that 121 “Ivory Notices” (and 105 Ivory evictions) was actually a very low figure, when taken into account that “Management staff deals with thousands of problem situations each year without allowing them to develop to the point of no return.”¹⁶⁴ Ivory evictions were viewed as a weapon of last resort, when the undesirable qualities or actions of a tenant exceeded the CHA’s capacity to change their behavior.

¹⁶³ Mary Wirth, “Confidential,” July 9, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

¹⁶⁴ Mary Wirth, “Confidential,” July 9, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

Though the *CHA v. Ivory* decision meant that the CHA was no longer responsible for providing a formal reason for eviction, the CHA still asked project managers to give evidence for eviction. This demonstrates that the CHA still systematized the Ivory eviction process, though this process was carried out internally. Wirth categorized these causes for eviction and created a tally for the eighteen-month period [see *Figure 2 in the Appendix*]. The three leading causes for Ivory evictions were “destruction of property and breaking the peace by juveniles” [sic], “Fraud - failure to cooperate on income plus other reasons”,¹⁶⁵ and “Fighting and creating disturbances (often with police activity)”, with 85 cases between these categories.¹⁶⁶ Likewise, many of the offenses which led to Ivory evictions can be understood as patterns of misbehavior which caused physical harm to neighboring tenants or monetary losses for the CHA. Crimes such as the use of narcotics, gambling, or other violent acts would have brought police into the projects,¹⁶⁷ resulting in fines by the city or negative coverage in the press.¹⁶⁸

However, other causes for eviction are much more subjective in nature. In particular, I am interested in those that involve a projection of the CHA’s moral philosophy onto their tenants — specifically their female tenants. Similar to the values demonstrated by the CHA in their capacity as managers of tenants, the errors of poor housekeeping and improper supervision or care of children invariably reflected on the matriarch of a household. For married and unmarried women in the projects alike, maintaining an orderly home and managing their children was upheld as a priority. This was evident in the previous section on tenant management. However,

¹⁶⁵ This cause for eviction seemingly contradicts Wirth’s statement that lying about family income justified an Ivory eviction, but the name of the category is vague enough that it was likely decided on a case-by-case basis.

¹⁶⁶ Mary Wirth, “Confidential,” July 9, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

¹⁶⁷ Mary Wirth, Supervisor Community and Tenant Relations to Mr. Harry J. Schneider, Director of Management, “Efficiency and Economy in Project Operation,” May 27, 1955, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

¹⁶⁸ Mary Wirth, “Re: Mrs. Pauline Lyons letter of complaint to General Kean” October 11, 1956, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

what is shocking about Wirth's investigation of causes for Ivory evictions is the harsh recourse which could follow from failing to display these idealized qualities of motherhood. An eviction from public housing — the loss of a stable home, connections to community, and access to social services — as a consequence of failing to uphold these values could be devastating for low-income families in this period. More so, even, for a family headed by a single mother who might have lacked a social safety net.

There are a number of causes for Ivory evictions listed above that likely acutely affected single mothers. Though it requires speculation on my part, this analysis is driven and supported by the characterization of the CHA that I have developed in the previous two sections. For example, the leading cause for Ivory evictions — crimes committed by juveniles — is an issue that is echoed in several other primary source documents. Poor behavior of children was an immediate concern for the CHA. As the numbers of large families increased throughout the 1950s and 1960s, so too did rates of juvenile delinquency and gang activity.¹⁶⁹ While the CHA sought to screen out these potential problem families in the selection phase, priority was given to families with children and soon the amount of children in public housing vastly outnumbered the adult population.¹⁷⁰ When juvenile misbehavior crossed the line from a nuisance to being dangerous or illicit, an Ivory eviction was employed to remove the entire household from the

¹⁶⁹ The CHA's attention toward truancy and gang activity in this period is another instance where race can be read into these documents. Though gang activity did not always indicate African American involvement (see Mary Wirth, "In January 1953 when I was beginning to work at the Jane Addams Houses..." September 30, 1953, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1]), by the mid-1960s gang activity around certain high-rises predominated by African-American tenants were commonplace. See Audrey Petty, ed., "Paula Hawkins (Interview)," in *High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing* (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney's, 2013), 125–31; Audrey Petty, ed., "Dolores Wilson (Interview)," in *High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing* (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney's, 2013), 31–36; Audrey Petty, ed., "Dawn Knight (Interview)," in *High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing* (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney's, 2013), 47–54.

¹⁷⁰ By 1967, the average public housing family had 4 children. This figure likely varied greatly across different projects. See Chicago Housing Authority, "Chicago Housing Authority Year Ended," December 31, 1967, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 16].

project.¹⁷¹ That parents in public housing were held responsible for the behavior of their children is nothing new.¹⁷²¹⁷³ However, the prevalence of these Ivory evictions for single-mother households — though not described in the archival documents — can be inferred. Like with tenant selection and management, CHA staff operated under the assumption that single-parent households, especially those lacking a male presence, were unable to control their children.¹⁷⁴ So it follows that of those households which the CHA decided to take definitive action against, many of which were likely single-mother households.

Though other causes listed for recorded “Ivory Notices” in the 1956 document were less common, their historical significance is still worth exploring. Wirth reported that having “unauthorized persons in household” accounted for 18 evictions.¹⁷⁵ Although the details of these cases are unknown, several other documents from the Mary Bolton Wirth Papers describe situations in which a female head of household was the only adult listed on a lease, and yet an inspection found that a male adult was also residing with her.¹⁷⁶ In some of these cases, the unauthorized person was actually an unlisted husband or other family member.

¹⁷¹ Mary Wirth, “Confidential,” July 9, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

¹⁷² Similarly, “Ivory Notices” due to “Leaving children alone and unsupervised...” requires the CHA to adjudicate a tenant’s standing in public housing based on their parenting. In this case, the tenant is not being held responsible for the actions of their children, but for failing to provide proper care to their children. Paradoxically, the CHA is reacting to the endangerment of children by evicting the household, thus further subjecting the children to hardship (if the children are still in their parent(s)’s custody).

¹⁷³ See Suzanne Avery, “Poll Adults on Teen Drug Addicts,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 4, 1957, Chicago Tribune Archives, which found that 55% of those surveyed thought that parents should be held responsible for their children’s delinquency. This number would doubtlessly be higher if the question regarded public housing parents, given the public vitriol for public housing at this time.

¹⁷⁴ There are only a few documents which describe a single-parent household where the adult was a male.

¹⁷⁵ Mary Wirth, “Confidential,” July 9, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

¹⁷⁶ Babette Stiefel to Mr. Winning, “Report on Home Visits to Unmarried Mothers at Dearborn Homes.”

But in cases where the additional adult was a “boyfriend” or “paramour,”¹⁷⁷ an Ivory eviction due to “Suspected immorality of household” might have been brought.¹⁷⁸ Evictions due to “unauthorized persons in household” could be justified as a practical response by the CHA: if the unlisted household member had a criminal background or caused issues at the project, the CHA needed to know which household to confront. Additionally, an unlisted adult was expected to pay a proportion of their income toward rent.¹⁷⁹ But evictions due to “suspected immorality,” based on the evidence provided throughout this thesis, is representative of the CHA’s pattern of scrutiny toward the sexual purity of single-mother tenants. Though the private relationships of tenants would not have necessarily affected other tenants in the projects, the CHA was concerned that immoral transgressions would adversely affect the entire project. Additionally, the phrase *suspected* immorality implies that the CHA could move to evict a tenant based on limited evidence — and because the Ivory eviction model did not allow tenants to contest their evictions in court, women accused of “suspected immorality” could be evicted based on rumors alone.

Similarly, there were a handful of Ivory evictions due to “illegitimacy causing over-occupying of units,”¹⁸⁰ which leaves a lot to be unpacked. The description does not state that “illegitimacy” — having children born out of wedlock — is a charge for an Ivory eviction. But rather, illegitimacy *causing over-occupancy of units*. By placing the onus of the charge on the issue of over-occupancy, the CHA stressed the practical cause for eviction instead of the moral objection that resulted from having children born outside of a marriage. While some of the other

¹⁷⁷ R. Tross, Department of Urban Renewal Relocation Representative to E. J. Lally, Relocation and Property Management Division, “Monthly Narrative, January, 1963,” January 31, 1963, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 2, Folder 5], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

¹⁷⁸ Mary Wirth, “Confidential,” July 9, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

¹⁷⁹ This was a common issue throughout for the CHA the twentieth century: many tenants would not report the income of their unlisted partner, as this would require their income to be paid toward rent.

¹⁸⁰ Mary Wirth, “Confidential,” July 9, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

reasons for eviction might have disproportionately affected single mothers, “illegitimacy causing over-occupying of units” appears much more targeted in nature.

Wirth’s report on “Ivory Notices” completes the lifecycle of poor housekeeping in public housing — it could bar a household from gaining admission to public housing, present hurdles for both project managers and tenants in the projects, and could even be a cause for an Ivory eviction. The fact that only four of the Ivory evictions were due to “low standard of housekeeping (to the point of violation of sanitary code, etc.)” indicates that though the CHA identified poor housekeeping as a major issue in many of its projects, their interventions ostensibly succeeded in improving the living standards of many “social problem” households. Or perhaps the CHA hesitated to invite outside attention by listing “low standard of housekeeping” as the cause for eviction in an era where the supply of affordable housing was low, even if poor housekeeping was proven to cause weighty problems for a project. Following this logic, it is also possible that many of those evicted by “Ivory Notices” *also* had bad housekeeping, but CHA staff were inclined to pick a more serious offense to list on the tenant’s record.^{181,182}

Once a family was evicted, all ties with the CHA and the social services they could render would be lost. In her report, Wirth remarks, “So far as I know, there is no information about these failures other than the termination of tenancy. No study has been made of where they go or what becomes of them.”¹⁸³ While the CHA saw evictions as a path of last resort, it is easy to see them as an act of swift relief. Once a tenant was evicted, the CHA was released from all

¹⁸¹ Jack L. Wank, “Meeting of the Community and Tenant Relations Division,” June 20, 1957, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 15].

¹⁸² This is the case for twenty-first-century evictions as well. The cause listed in eviction court documents often fails to describe the tenant’s history which precipitated the eviction. See Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2017).

¹⁸³ Mary Wirth, “Confidential,” July 9, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

responsibilities toward their wellbeing. While a socially “undesirable” *tenant* was a source of great anxiety — their lifestyle choices viewed as an issue to be diagnosed and solved — a *former tenant* was no longer the CHA’s problem. However, resorting to an eviction was not done lightly. Wirth recalls that “[w]hen an ‘Ivory’ eviction became necessary there was always considerable anxiety throughout the Authority especially about the news coverage...sometimes at the last moment...C&TR [Community and Tenant Relations] had to resort to temporary shelter arrangement.”¹⁸⁴ Even after the formal relationship between tenants and CHA staff was terminated, informal ties such as the one described by Wirth demonstrate the intimacy of an eviction that is not captured in the “Ivory Notices” document.

An Ivory eviction was not just a marker of a tenant’s failure to comply with CHA rules, but also a cause for serious reflection by CHA staff. Wirth writes that “[t]hese are the 121 families with whom we [the CHA] failed completely. It is not a failure of CHA alone but of the community agencies and the families.”¹⁸⁵ If a situation proceeded to the point of an Ivory eviction, this was because the CHA’s standards for tenant selection were not strict enough and the interventions by management were insufficient. Wirth’s record of Ivory evictions serves as a stark reminder to CHA staff that their operation had limitations, but that there was a streamlined removal process that could be selectively employed (even if resorting to an “Ivory Notice” was viewed as a failure).

Finally, Justice Schwartz concludes the *CHA v. Ivory* ruling with “[a public housing authority] would not exercise arbitrary authority, not being motivated by a desire for profit or

¹⁸⁴ Mary Wirth, “‘Those Ivory Notices,’” circa 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 8].

¹⁸⁵ Mary Wirth, “Confidential,” July 9, 1956, University of Chicago Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

anything other than the welfare of the project itself. We assume that this is the case here.”¹⁸⁶ The fact that the CHA’s tenant management strategies went largely unchallenged in this period is likely a reflection of Justice Schwartz’s conclusion: an assumption of best intentions on the part of the CHA. There are numerous documents in the Mary Bolton Wirth Papers that describe selfless and progressive actions taken by CHA staff — evictions are surely the most ugly and devastating. But by focusing on Ivory evictions as a unique and historically undocumented phenomena, the practical and ideological priorities of CHA staff can be interrogated. The unfortunate consequences of the CHA’s “desire for...the welfare of the project itself” is unveiled through my examination of the coded language in the reasons for “Ivory Notices” that targeted the lifestyles of many single mothers.

Conclusion

Throughout 2019 and 2020, I attended monthly Local Advisory Committee (LAC) meetings at Dearborn Homes.¹⁸⁷ One interaction from a January 2020 meeting stood out to me. Up until that point, the questions posed by Dearborn tenants to CHA management had been more or less mundane. But when the topic turned to the issue of home visits, the energy in the room shifted. One tenant began, “I still don’t understand why you all can send people in [to my unit] without letting me know. Say that I have 99 and a half kids, that is *none* of your business. I pay my rent, I don’t need managers coming and telling me one thing and fining me for another.” Her question unleashed an onslaught of similar concerns. Didn’t tenants have the right to know what the purpose of a home inspection was? Could CHA send inspectors unannounced? How did they know that the dogs used to look for bed bugs weren’t actually searching for drugs? The CHA

¹⁸⁶ *Chicago Housing Authority v. Elizabeth Ivory*, 341 Ray Smith 282 (Appellate Courts of Illinois 1950).

¹⁸⁷ Author was in attendance to fulfill data collection for her Public Policy Studies B.A. Thesis: “Two Years Out: An Evaluation of the Smoke-Free Public Housing Policy’s Implementation in Chicago”.

staff did their best to assuage the tenants' concerns, but remained firm that living in public housing was no different from living in any multi-family structure: privacy had to be sacrificed to ensure that one tenant's lifestyle did not harm a neighbor.

More than a half a century later, it is remarkable that issues of surveillance and privacy in public housing are not only ongoing, but retain many similarities to the CHA's management policies of the 1950s and 1960s. Even though the CHA and management have made deliberate strides in recent decades to address race-based discrimination and acknowledge past mistakes,¹⁸⁸ many tenants remain confused and unsatisfied as to what rights are guaranteed for a tenant in public housing.

Studying the CHA's approach to tenant selection, management, and removal in the 1950s and 1960s with a contemporary lens reveals situations where the CHA's paternalistic methods could almost be justified, in light of their overarching mission. For any readers familiar with the challenges of operating within a service-providing, not-for-profit agency, it is understandable that hard choices must be made when it comes to certain clients. But in highlighting how the CHA's policies targeted low-income women — especially single mothers — I hope to demonstrate that the CHA was anything but “well known...for its nondiscrimination policies” in this period.¹⁸⁹ There are lessons to be taken from this investigation which still resonate in the twenty-first century — that social welfare policies which enforce a hierarchy of deservingness among the poor inevitably leave certain groups behind.

¹⁸⁸ *As an example, see the Gautreaux decision*, U.S. Congress House Committee on Government Operations Manpower and Housing Committee, *The Gautreaux Decision and Its Effect on Subsidized Housing* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979).

¹⁸⁹ Fuerst, “Social Problem Families; Speech Given in Buffalo.”

Appendix

Figure 1: Mary Wirth, "A Practical Classification of Tenancy", January 3, 1956, University of Chicago
Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 2].

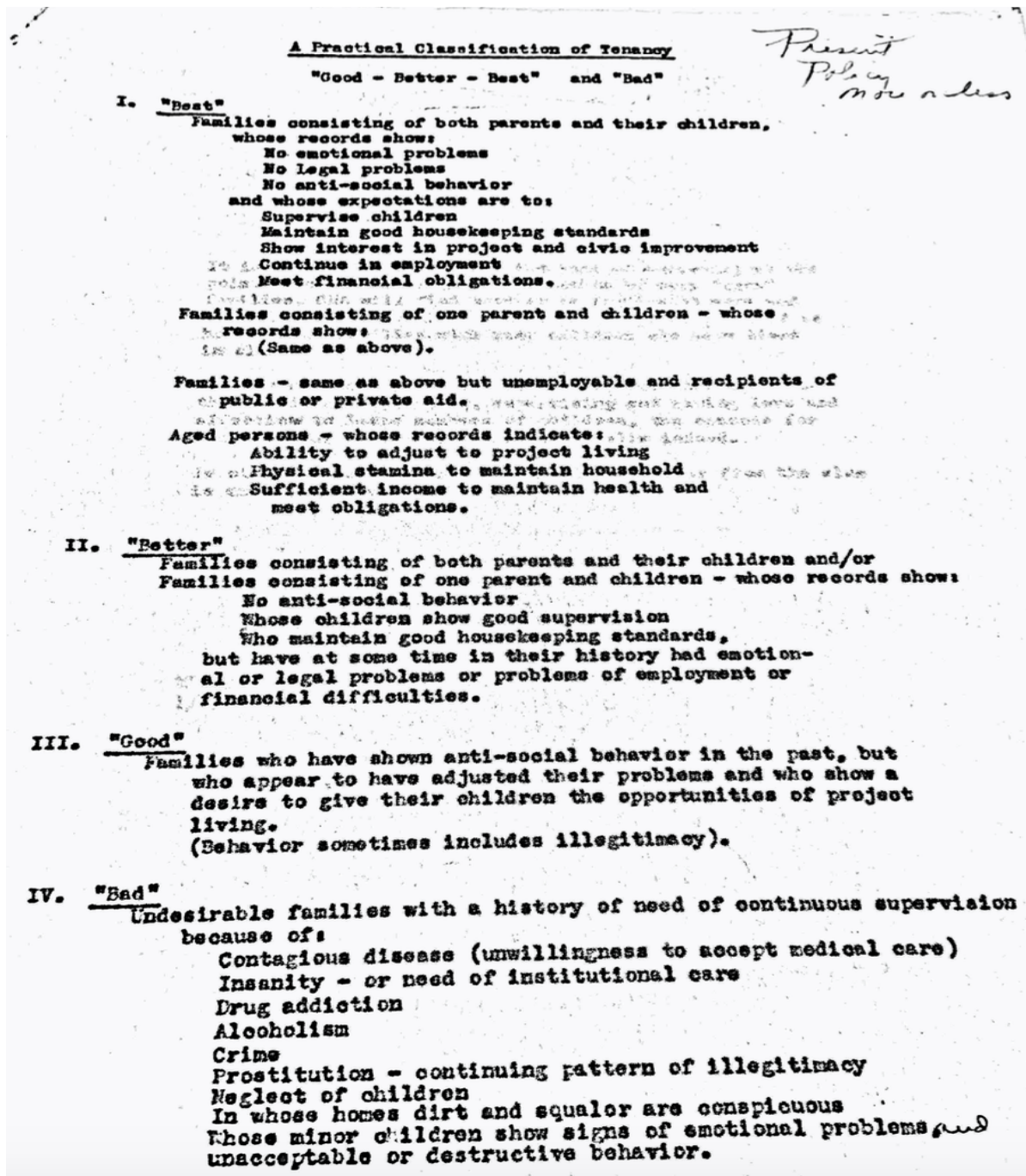


Figure 2: Mary Wirth, "Confidential," July 9, 1956, University of Chicago

Special Collection Research Center, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1].

Fighting and creating disturbances (often with police activity)	23	
Use of fire arms	2	
Excessive drinking, abuse, etc.	13	
Use of narcotics or violation of narcotics laws (police raids, etc.)	5	
Gambling - use of dwelling unit for illegal gambling, etc.	5	
Destruction of property and breaking the peace by juveniles	34	
including drinking	2	Mary E. Wirth
narcotics	2	Supervisor
with guns	3	Community and Tenant Relations
damaging elevators	4	
starting fires	7	
Unauthorized persons in household	18	
Stealing	4	
Low standard of housekeeping (to the point of violation of sanitary code, etc.)	4	
Damage to property by autos (reckless driving on projects, etc.)	3	
Indecent exposure and/or mental instability	12	
Attempted rape	1	
Involvement in racial disturbances	1	
Leaving children alone and unsupervised and abandonment of children, etc. (Court action involved)	6	
Dogs in dwelling unit and other nuisances	4	
Suspected immorality of household	7	
Illegitimacy causing over-occupancy of units	2	
Change of tenants (lessee and family not in home)	5	
Fraud - failure to cooperate on income plus other reasons	28	
Fraudulent admission	12	

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